



Asia-Pacific
Economic Cooperation



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A central collage of five circular photographs showing women in different contexts: a woman pointing at a whiteboard, a woman smiling in a workshop, a woman in a lab coat holding a test tube, a woman with a child, and a woman working with a power tool.

Healthy Women,
Healthy Economies
**A GUIDEBOOK
FOR SMES**

December 2018

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Introduction

For women to reach their full economic potential, they need to have access to adequate health care and a workplace free of safety and gender-based violence issues. In response, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) provides a unique multi-economy forum to identify and promote policies and practices that address these concerns. Since 2014, APEC has promoted programs and policies that foster better health outcomes for women across the Asia-Pacific region, leading to their greater economic participation and empowerment, which in turn, is crucial for economic growth.

The APEC Healthy Women, Healthy Economies (HWHE) Initiative was launched in 2014 by the United States and the Philippines in partnership with the private sector to break down health-related barriers for women to enter, remain, and advance in the workforce. The initiative looks at five areas: (1) workplace health and safety, (2) health access and awareness, (3) gender-based violence, (4) sexual and reproductive health, and (5) work-life balance.

In 2015, APEC welcomed the [HWHE Policy Toolkit](#). Developed by an expert group, the toolkit provides a menu of options and actions across the five areas that economies may pursue in part, or as a whole, to achieve HWHE objectives. The following year, the HWHE initiative took the toolkit from vision to action through a two-day workshop. During the event, APEC introduced several tools that included an [economic case study for governments](#) and a [business case for the private sector](#), which were supplemented by some practical case studies. These tools also included an evaluation framework to enable implementers to measure progress. These tools were vital not only for helping economies and businesses implement the toolkit but also in providing empirical evidence and examples for why these policies and programs should be operationalized.

A 2017 workshop offered the opportunity to hear from implementing governments and businesses on the challenges faced and progress made towards implementing the toolkit. Many implementers were at a crossroads – they had made



progress but found that their programs were not reaching as many smaller companies or women employees as they wanted. Coming out of the 2017 workshop, participants noted the need to tailor their programs to different-sized businesses.

In response to this call, this HWHE Guidebook for SMEs aims to provide both small- and medium-size enterprises (SME) and policy makers with relevant and tailored actions, building on the five pillars in the original policy toolkit adapted specifically for SMEs. Many of the elements in the original toolkit cut across several issue areas and this guidebook focuses on those issues that are most prominent to SMEs. For example, while the sexual and reproductive health pillar is not examined as a stand-alone pillar within the guidebook, the applicable elements are captured in other pillars, including health access and awareness and work-life balance and are detailed here.

This guidebook highlights HWHE policies and programs that are specifically relevant and applicable to both male- and



female-owned SMEs in the formal sector across the APEC region. Although each APEC economy self-defines *SMEs*, small enterprises typically range from 10 to 50, and medium enterprises typically range from 50 to 499 employees. The case studies in this guidebook detail examples in which businesses and governments from across the region have engaged in these types of programs. Through this guidebook, SMEs have an opportunity to understand how health-related programs and policies fit into the context of their businesses, enabling them to take actions that affect their employees, recruit higher caliber staff, increase employee retention, and address critical employee needs. The guidebook will also inform governments on how to better structure programs related to HWHE so that SMEs can benefit.

Why SMEs?

SMEs account for over 97 percent of all enterprises and employ over half of the workforce across APEC economies. On average, women own 37 percent of SMEs in APEC economies. SMEs contribute to economic competitiveness and innovation in addition to contributing significantly to economic growth, with their share of GDP ranging from 20 percent to 50 percent in most APEC economies. APEC continues to highlight SMEs as one of its key priorities.

Improving women's health increases their abilities to engage and remain in the workforce. These issues are important for all companies, including SMEs. However, a number of prevailing attitudes and assumptions inhibit the implementation of programs and policies to address health-related barriers for women specifically in the SME sector. These include attitudes that regard health-related barriers for women as nonexistent or existing barriers as being too costly for SMEs to address. Moreover, there is often a generalized assumption that health-related programs are burdensome for SMEs to implement. These perceptions often limit SME owners, managers, and staff members from taking steps to promote the health and wellness of their female employees above and beyond what is required by law. The recommendations that follow look at how to address some

of these perceptions. For example, suggested actions indicate how governments can implement programs and policies while providing implementation support and clear guidance for SMEs so that they are not viewed as burdensome.

SMEs work environments differ from those of large corporations. Some small enterprises are run in a personal, family-like fashion, while others incorporate more formalized procedures. However, regardless of their operational structure, compared to large enterprises, SMEs tend to be resource-constrained in terms of time, effort, and access to information. More research is needed to identify how size and scale differences impact health-related practices for female employees.

Though limited data exists on SME health-related policies in APEC, data is being collected on this topic in other regions, most notably Europe. For example, a 2009 report from the UK Department of Work and Pensions' family friendly working hours taskforce reported that 65% of employers experienced improved recruitment and higher retention by providing flexible work benefits and 58% of SMEs experienced increased productivity by providing these benefits.

Of the data that is available, work-life balance issues are most often assessed. Research indicates that family-friendly workplace policies reduce turnover, which reduces costs since employee turnover is expensive. In the U.S., the average cost of hiring a single new employee in firms with fewer than 1,000 employees is US\$3,079. However, this cost can be even greater for replacing an experienced, senior-level employee. In addition to hiring costs, employers incur costs for onboarding, training and the impact on employee morale and higher business error rates. Overall, an abundance of data exists on women employees at large, multinational firms and women entrepreneurs, but data on women employees at SMEs is limited.

Despite the data gaps, the case for implementing HWHE reforms that impact women SME owners and employees holds strong.



Workplace Health and Safety

Occupational health illnesses and hazards have different impacts on women and men. Though women are generally less likely to work in hazardous professions than men, rates of occupational injury and illness among women employees are often not clearly known due to lack of awareness and lack of data. In the APEC region, a large share of women work in sectors that sometimes have limited occupational health and safety regulations and controls, such as agriculture, manufacturing and increasingly construction. The differing impact on women includes lack of adequate sanitation facilities, improper and ill-fitting protective gear and clothing, and lack of awareness of how these issues can be tackled at the SME level. This results in increased vulnerability of women for occupational injuries and illnesses.

SMEs in particular can face challenges in meeting health and safety requirements. In some economies, SMEs are not inspected regularly for health and safety standards and are not required to report work-related accidents and injuries. The impact of work-related accidents and injuries can be particularly disruptive for SMEs in comparison to other types of enterprises. Short-term business interruptions can lead to loss of clients and contracts, which are vital to

operations, and disproportionately affect SMEs compared with corporations, which tend to have more clients. A serious incident can lead to business closure owing to the direct costs of injured employees or the loss of contracts or customers, or both. Small businesses, especially those in high-risk industries (such as construction, manufacturing, warehousing, and health care), need to be actively engaged in workplace safety to retain employees and successfully continue their operations. In general, SMEs face several difficulties in complying with occupational health and safety regulations owing to fewer resources and less awareness of the costs of noncompliance in terms of higher risks.

A major impediment to workplace safety for women is the fact that personal protective equipment and clothing (such as respirators, gloves, and work boots in the construction industry) are mostly designed to fit average-sized men. If gloves are too big or if hard hats slide off, it can affect job performance as well as expose women to accidental injuries. Correctly fitted safety boots may also be difficult for female workers to find since a typical woman's foot is both shorter and narrower than a typical man's foot, so a smaller boot may be the right length but not the right width. A greater risk for life threatening injuries can occur when flame resistant clothing or protective fall harnesses are not properly fitted for women.

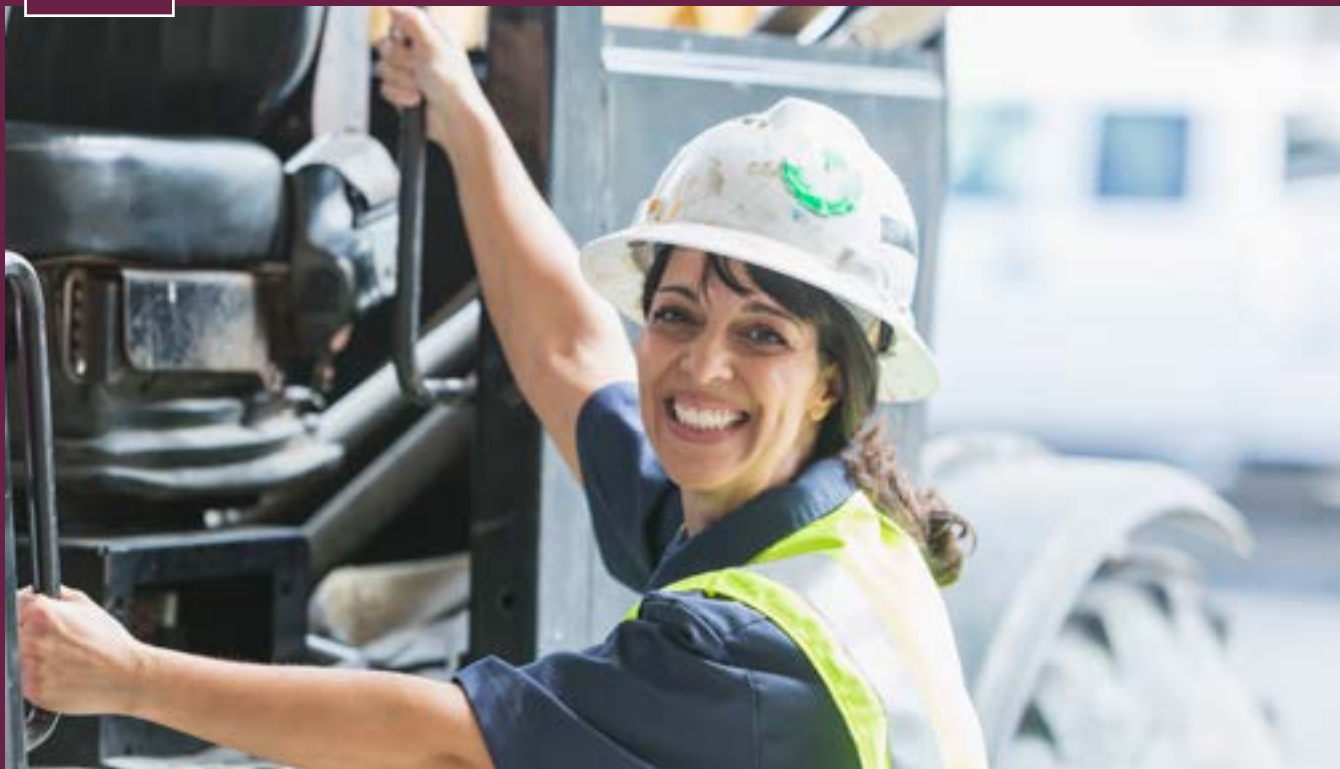
CASE STUDY



Peru: Investing in Employee Health Improves the Work Environment

Ruth Abanto, owner and director of Feel Good Alternative Therapies in Lima provides workplace oriented physical therapy for employees in small and large companies. Feel Good is a small company, employing 12 individuals (11 are female). Physical therapists tend to spend a lot of their time on their feet and can experience high levels of physical and emotional stress because of their professional demands. Feel Good invests in the health of its employees by providing them with

- Free personal physical therapy sessions
- Free workshops on how to stay healthy at work, such as strengthening core muscles and learning beneficial breathing techniques
- Emotional support at work or through a WhatsApp group chat
- Flexible work schedules.

CASE
STUDY

The United States: Developing Professional Protective Gear Fitted for Women Employees to Reduce Occupational Risks

Terri Piasecki, owner of Peak Safety Supply in Apex, North Carolina, started her business more than 10 years ago, selling professional protective gear for women working in construction. Terri still finds a lack of understanding of the difference between unisex and women-specific options. Women are not just smaller-sized than men, their body configurations and proportions are different. While unisex safety gear is appropriate for some situations, women require correctly sized and fitted clothing and equipment especially in more hazardous settings. Large corporations can set aside the resources to identify and purchase the right size and fit of safety gear for their women employees, but this process is often perceived as too time-consuming and costly for SMES to undertake. In other cases, employers do not allow women to procure their own safety equipment. As Terri notes, "I'll have women place an order, only to have it cancelled later that day or the next day because their supervisor won't allow them to purchase or provide their own safety equipment."

In addition, it is critical that safety gear, such as fall protection harnesses, pass safety testing on women rather than being simply adapted to fit women's bodies more comfortably without actual safety test. In the US, no biomechanic testing has been conducted on a fall protection harness marketed for women to ensure that it will provide women with the safety and protection needed.

Recommendations and Actionable Steps

- If gender-sensitive workplace safety regulations are already in place and cover SMEs, governments can promote SME compliance by providing a checklist or easy-to-use guide, making the implementation of such regulations less burdensome.
- Australia's Safe Work program offers a safety pack for small businesses that can be downloaded from their website.
- There is a need to raise awareness of the critical importance for SMEs to provide properly fitted protective gear for women employees in the construction, health care, and related industries. Governments and SMEs could provide a checklist and examples of how to assess a proper fit for female employees.
- There is a need for collection, analysis, and dissemination of comparative, sex-disaggregated data on differences in workplace health and safety requirements for SMEs in the APEC region.
- While gender-based safety and health data are collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, they are typically not analyzed or reported.

Australia's Safe Work program offers a safety pack for small businesses that can be downloaded from their website.



Health Access and Awareness

Access to health services is critical: absenteeism and reduced productivity are common effects when women face barriers to medical attention. Yet women often face challenges in accessing affordable health care and also have different health needs than men. Women face greater demand for health care at younger ages than men, mostly due to reproductive health needs. Moreover, women tend to be more susceptible to certain types of diseases and illnesses, such as certain noncommunicable diseases (NCD) including lupus, osteoarthritis, and thyroid disease. There is a rising need for women to access quality care and treatment for NCD.

Being able to offer health care for employees is crucial to attracting and retaining talent as well as to ensuring a healthy and productive workforce. As a group, SMEs are an underserved market which can offer a win-win opportunity for providers to create profitable, tailored solutions to meet their specific needs. Yet in some economies across the region, businesses with fewer than 50 employees are not required to provide health insurance. In many APEC economies, SMEs also face challenges in finding affordable, comprehensive healthcare plans for their employees. According to the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS), in 2015, the average deductible for all U.S. businesses was \$423 lower than for businesses with fewer than 50 employees. SMEs

often face higher administrative and premium costs, making the provision of healthcare costlier. Thus, the high cost of health insurance policies sometimes inhibit SMEs from hiring additional full-time employees and expanding their businesses. As a major segment of employers across the APEC region, this impacts whether many women have access to health insurance, including maternal and reproductive coverage.

For women business owners in particular, lack of access to affordable healthcare can affect their ability to reinvest earnings into company growth. Women entrepreneurs and small business owners experience financial and investment barriers to a greater extent than male business owners. Facing steep healthcare costs can further exasperate this issue for women business owners.

Furthermore, SME owners often lack awareness and information about the available options of providing health care benefits for themselves and their employees. SMEs tend to have no or smaller human resources departments, which hinders their ability to conduct informed negotiations with healthcare providers and determine the best health coverage for employees. Some local and national organizations are involved in health care issues, such as Women in Public Policy (WIPP) and Women Construction Owners & Executives (WCOE) in the U.S. However, there is room for further action on health care and the challenges SMEs face in providing this employee benefit.

CASE STUDY

Canada: Providing Maternal Healthcare Attracts Talent

Located in Ottawa, Amika Mobile is one of the few companies in this technology sector to be both led and co-founded by a woman engineer, Suhayya (Sue) Abu-Hakima, B.Eng., M.Eng., Ph.D. Sue has a Masters and Doctorate in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Amika Mobile is her second start-up in AI. As a small business, Amika Mobile has created a female friendly work culture by taking deliberate steps to ensure a gender balanced workplace and by providing additional maternity and medical benefits for her employees. As Sue notes: "Our 50/50 male/female employee ratio is unusual for the tech sector and it requires deliberate interventions to achieve given the shortage of female candidates. Operating in a highly competitive industry, additional maternity and medical benefits can act as an important differentiator for attracting female talent." Sue has noticed that young women seek employers that offer additional medical benefits and are also more likely to take advantage of these benefits than their male colleagues. In Canada, small business employers are not required to provide their employees with more health and maternity benefits than what the government provides. Amika Mobile's employees receive additional coverage and benefits such as the costs incurred for: medications and pharmaceuticals, specialists, semi-private hospital rooms, physical therapy, and psychological therapy.

The United States: Providing Support for Returning Parents through Digital Solutions

The Cleo app provides comprehensive prenatal and postpartum care connecting parents to vetted, experts ranging from lactation consultants to parenting therapists via digital technologies. Consultations take place in-person or via skype and can be scheduled through 24/7 text messaging. This innovative app was launched in 2016 by female co-founders Shannon Spanhake and Chitra Akileswaran. Cleo is currently available in 35 economies, 12 of which are APEC member economies.

Direct business benefits for SMEs providing the Cleo app to their employees include health savings, and attraction and retention of female employees. BPM, a medium-sized public accounting and advisory firm in the U.S., has realized these benefits through usage of the app. According to Lisa DeGisi, Benefits & Wellness Specialist at BPM, the retention rate of new mothers has increased since introducing the app; all new mothers that used the Cleo app have returned to work after having a child. The app has also increased working fathers' engagement as parents and helped create a culture of sensitivity to working parents.

HEALTH ACCESS AND AWARENESS

Recommendations and Actionable Steps

- Providers can employ stronger pooling mechanisms for the small employee group market, where SMEs fall. Governments can implement policies that provide opportunities for SMEs to pool.
- Mednefits' digital platform allows SMEs in Singapore to pool together to negotiate affordable insurance premiums with healthcare providers. In the three years following its launch, the digital platform has facilitated health insurance coverage for more than 15,000 workers from 180 SMEs in Singapore.
- Maria Health offers similar services to more than 60 SMEs in the Philippines.
- Providers can increase the number of plans available to small- and medium-size employers.
- Governments can provide or mandate affordable healthcare options for SME owners and their employees.
- Governments and business associations can conduct information and communication campaigns on the available health insurance options, including information on maternal and reproductive services, that SMEs can offer their employees.
- More data should be collected on differences in the regulatory environment and on options for health care coverage for SMEs in APEC economies, as well as on data on the numbers of SMEs that provide health care benefits to their employees (disaggregated by sex of the owner).

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Gender-Based Violence

Sexual harassment and violence, both in and outside the workplace, has detrimental effects for women, the work environment, and their employers. Workplace sexual harassment and intimate partner violence can result in increased employee absenteeism and reduced productivity, thus affecting women, businesses, and the economy as a whole.

The perception that sexual harassment is not an issue for SMEs is a determining factor in whether many businesses have policies in place. According to a 2016 Manta poll of 594 U.S. small business owners, 67 percent of employers have no anti-harassment policies or training in place. Also, 41 percent of respondents reported that sexual harassment policies were unnecessary given their small workforce and 11 percent responded that sexual harassment policies were overly politically correct for their business's culture. However, workplace sexual harassment is a rampant issue in businesses of all sizes. In response to a 2012 Australian Human Rights Commission survey of workers in Australian SMEs, one-in-five respondents over the age 15 years reported having experienced sexual harassment in the workplace during the past five years.

Although this is a widespread issue, regulations around sexual harassment policies are limited for SMEs. In the U.S., harassment is by law a form of discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which provides that workplace harassment is unlawful. This regulation applies only to businesses with 15 or more employees; moreover, it does not require companies of any size to have an official policy on sexual harassment. If employees experience harassment, they may not know how or where to submit a complaint or what resources are available especially at small businesses which tend not to have a dedicated human resources department. In addition, whereas large corporations may be able to provide anonymity, it may be difficult for SMEs to ensure.

Formalization of a workplace sexual harassment policy is crucial for SMEs to signal to their employees that sexual harassment is taken seriously. Dissemination and enforcement are also critical. In addition, it is important to provide services such as anonymous harassment reporting hotlines for employees. Formal policies are also imperative for communicating acceptable behaviors and the clear consequences for harassment. In addition to addressing sexual harassment, comprehensive workplace policies may also include resources and support for employees experiencing gender-based violence at home.

CASE STUDY



Papua New Guinea: Increasing Productivity of Female Employees by addressing Family Sexual Violence

Emanuel Papas is Managing Director at Rhodes PNG, a construction and property development company. Rhodes PNG is headquartered in Port Moresby and has 50 employees, 12 of which are women working in nontraditional roles such as a machine operator or as logistics and procurement clerks. Rhodes PNG has experienced both "on the job" absenteeism and presenteeism caused by family and sexual violence (FSV), which results in reduced productivity and disproportionately affects their female employees. Rhodes PNG's human resources managers have developed informal practices to address the effects of FSV on employees. Emanuel feels management has introduced a baseline approach but that it lacks formal, systemic procedures. Currently, Rhodes PNG is working with the IFC and PNG's Business Coalition for Women to formalize their company practices. When SMEs invest time and effort to formalize measures, this raises the visibility and importance of the issue to their employees companywide, demonstrating a commitment to tackling these issues.



CASE STUDY



Peru: Increasing Incentives for SME Participation in Gender Equality Seal Program

The Peruvian Ministry for Women and Vulnerable Populations promotes women's wellness and safety at work and at home through a voluntary certification process, Sello Empresa Segura (Gender Equality Seal). To earn this seal, enterprises' organizational processes and systems are audited and evaluated for compliance according to five main criteria, one of which stipulates the eradication of sexual harassment in the workplace. Companies of all sizes have been certified since its inception in 2013.

Nonetheless, Julia Isabel Laura Jara, owner of Camomille Pijamas and co-founder of the radio station "Mujeres en Accion" highlighted some difficulties for SMEs to become certified. This program as well as other seal programs in the region could be strengthened by providing assistance or capacity building to SMEs for fulfilling the certification requirements. In addition, the marketing, promotion, and corporate social responsibility benefits are less apparent for SMEs, which tend to rely less on those benefits than larger corporations. Benefits such as attracting new clients, raising existing client loyalty, and increasing sales are generally more impactful to larger corporations. Despite these challenges, two SMEs, Avanza Sostenible and Reforestadora Amazonica, received the seal in 2017. Hopefully, more enterprises will be recognized in the future.

CASE STUDY



Australia: Recognizing SME Commitments through the Employer of Choice for Gender Equality Program

In 2014 Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency established the annual Employer of Choice for Gender Equality program to recognize businesses and organizations that are committed to achieving gender equality. The program is aligned with the Workplace Gender Equality Act of 2012 and promotes gender equality as a necessity to a successfully managed business. The program criterion include flexible working arrangements and other initiatives aimed at supporting women and men, including those with family or care responsibilities, and preventing sexual harassment and discrimination. Program targets include improving gender equality outcomes, among others. It requires that participating companies track and report progress annually on indicators such as the utilization of flexible work schedules (including part-time) for women and men by manager and nonmanager categories; both utilization of, and return from, parental leave (paid and unpaid) by both women and men; and the number of harassment claims. Although most recipients of this gender equality recognition are large corporations, several SMEs have received this honor, including First State Super, Gilbert + Tobin, HESTA, Peoplebank Australia Limited, and PPG Industries Australia Pty Ltd.

Recommendations and Actionable Steps

- Incentive structures for voluntary certification in programs that address gender-based violence differ depending on firm size. Government should incentivize the certification of SMEs by providing tax incentives or allowing certified SMEs increased access to public procurement contracts.
- Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency requires that companies submit data annually on several indicators around harassment, equal pay, flexible work, and more. Employers that comply with reporting requirements receive a notice of compliance, which they are required to provide when bidding on federal government procurement opportunities of a threshold amount.
- Governments should develop an agreed-upon definition of workplace sexual harassment that SMEs can look to as a standard in developing their own policies.
- Governments could aid SMEs themselves by establishing a clear definition of workplace sexual harassment, providing policy templates for effectively addressing instances of sexual harassment including consequences, and helping with dissemination and enforcement mechanisms and channels.
- SMEs should expand existing policies to include resources and support for employees experiencing gender-based violence outside of work.
- Government programs and resources for reporting mechanisms and support for survivors of GBV can provide survivor anonymity that many SMEs cannot offer internally. SMEs can include these services in their employee handbooks or human resources policies.
- In some APEC economies (such as Papua New Guinea), companies including SMEs are required to spend up to two percent of their annual revenue on training for their employees. Companies should target some of this toward GBV/FSV awareness and policies, which could increase the engagement of the SME sector to address GBV/FSV issues in the workplace.

Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency requires that companies submit data annually on several indicators around harassment, equal pay, flexible work, and more. Employers that comply with reporting requirements receive a notice of compliance, which they are required to provide when bidding on federal government procurement opportunities of a threshold amount.



Work-Life Balance

It is common in many cultures for women to be expected to serve as the main caregiver of a household and to balance this role with employment. Programs that address pregnancy discrimination, family care options, breastfeeding, flexible schedules, paid sick and holiday leave, and parental leave can help women balance family and other responsibilities while not only remaining, but also advancing, in the workforce.

In general, corporations are more likely than SMEs to provide formal work-family balance policies. However, this varies across APEC economies: U.S. companies with 50 to 99 employees are more likely than companies with 1,000 or more employees to provide flexible working hours, telework, and paid leave.

SMEs are less likely to be required by law to provide work-family balance policies. Although many economies have

family policy protections in place, in numerous cases, SMEs are exempt, or the policies are applied differently. One example is Japan, where small firms are exempt from legal requirements regarding flexible schedules following childbirth. Another example is the United States: the Family and Medical Leave Act applies only to companies with more than 50 employees. This act requires these companies to provide unpaid, job-protected leave for family and medical reasons with continuation of group health insurance under the same terms and conditions as if the employee had not taken leave. Even in economies where regulations exist, discrimination against pregnant women is somewhat common among small businesses.

Often, there is an assumption that flexible workplace policies are too expensive for SMEs to implement. However, studies show that small businesses that offer these policies experience lower rates of employee turnover and absenteeism and, therefore, lower costs for employee replacement and paid

CASE STUDY



Mexico: Breaking the Traditional Full-Time Employment Paradigm

Ana Lucia Cepeda started her online business, Bolsa Rosa, in 2014, after witnessing the large numbers of educated women forced to leave their jobs because companies in Mexico were unwilling to offer flexible working arrangements to support work/life balance for mothers. Even though Mexican labor laws allow for part-time and flex-time work, most companies only offer traditional full-time employment options. Bolsa Rosa provides mothers with a job board for permanent flexi-work positions. The company also works with businesses to shift company culture and introduce permanent “flex time” positions. The focus is on evaluating work performance in terms of results and deliverables instead of hours spent working at the office. Most of Bolsa Rosa’s clientele are SMEs because human resources policies at most larger companies in Mexico are not yet equipped to accommodate permanent, flex-time workers.



sick leave. A case from the United States demonstrates that it can be costly not to address these issues: one study of small businesses found that employee stress over balancing of work and family obligations was associated with increased absenteeism, resulting in costs of \$496 to \$1,984 per employee per year. In many cases, SMEs lack an understanding of how the benefit of flexible work schedules is a beneficial investment that can increase productivity. Instead, flexible work is often viewed narrowly as freelance or part-time work, a perception that acts as a disincentive for companies to hire women who require it.

SMEs owners and managers cite concerns over workload coverage when female employees take family leave. With fewer employees to cover colleague's tasks while on leave, this labor shortage can be daunting. SMEs are also less likely to replace staff when they take family leave; instead, they depend on reorganization of existing staff and tasks. SME staff must continually cultivate their capabilities through informal knowledge sharing across employees so that coverage for others is practical.

Childcare was one of the key barriers to women's economic participation highlighted in the APEC SME survey

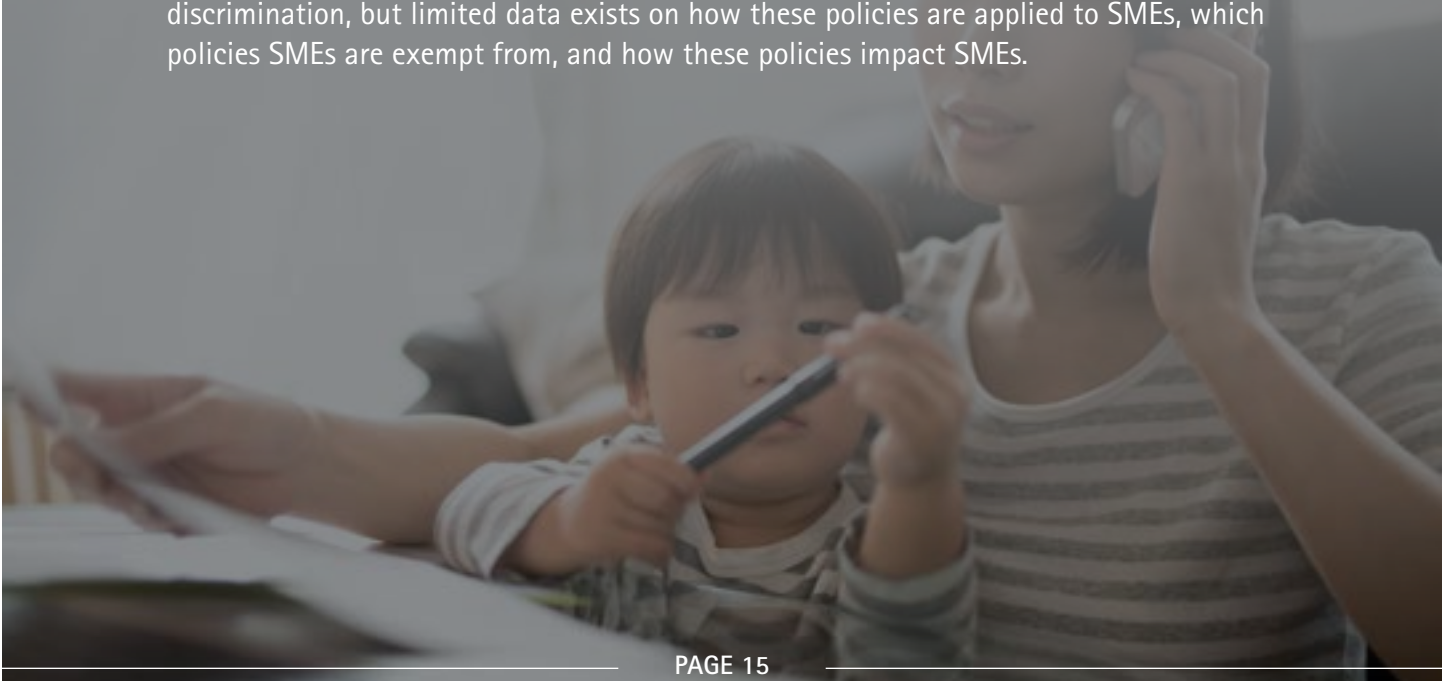
completed in March 2017. Because women are more likely than men to shoulder childcare responsibilities, public or privately provided childcare is crucial to enabling women's employment opportunities. There is a widely held view that maternity, paternity, and parental leave policies are too expensive for SMEs to provide. However, a recent International Finance Corporation study demonstrates that the returns, at minimum for larger companies, are greater than the cost to implement. With provision of childcare benefits, companies experience better talent recruitment and retention, increased employee motivation and productivity, and reduced absenteeism. Although there is a need to address the issue of childcare, it is important to acknowledge the adverse effects that are seen in some economies that require companies with a certain number of female employees to provide childcare. Many SMEs view this as an incentive not to hire women, thus leading to hiring discrimination. This issue is mitigated in economies that offer government-provided childcare. More than half of APEC economies have some form of public childcare services that are partially or fully funded by the government. However, it is unclear to what extent, SMEs are able to access and fully benefit from these services.



Recommendations and Actionable Steps

- Raise awareness of the benefits of flexible schedules. Governments and the private sector can help raise awareness through communication campaigns or matching programs, such as Bolsa Rosa in Mexico.
- Policymakers can expand government-provided childcare services to reach SMEs and ensure that there is uptake by SME employees.
- Once childcare provision policies are in place, governments can provide guidelines and implementation support to help businesses comply with such laws.
- Instead of taking on the costs of onsite childcare alone, SMEs can partner with other SMEs in the same geographic location to share a centrally located childcare center.
- Article 203 of the Labor Code of Chile explicitly allows employers to provide childcare jointly and offsite.
- Rather than providing onsite childcare, SMEs can provide vouchers to their employees to utilize external, nearby childcare centers.
- SMEs can create strategic coverage plans so that an employee taking maternity, paternity, or parental leave is feasible from a workload perspective.
- Greater collection of data on the applicability of existing laws to SMEs is needed. Current data predominantly focuses on flexible work arrangements and family leave policies. In terms of legal protections, there is a fair amount of reporting on family care policies and pregnancy discrimination, but limited data exists on how these policies are applied to SMEs, which policies SMEs are exempt from, and how these policies impact SMEs.

Article 203 of the Labor Code of Chile explicitly allows employers to provide childcare jointly and offsite.



Cross-Cutting Recommendations

Although the previous recommendations target specific areas of the HWHE Policy Toolkit, many of these cross-cutting recommendations address barriers that are connected and require governments and businesses to take approaches that address their interrelated nature. The recommendations below apply to programs and policies across all areas of the HWHE Policy Toolkit.

The Papua New Guinea Business Coalition for Women partners with Femili PNG to provide family and sexual violence services to employees of the coalition members.

- Governments can expand and modify existing health-related programs to include SMEs. Although it may not be fitting to expand existing programs to smaller businesses, economies can modify eligibility and evaluation criteria for SMEs specifically.
- Where feasible, SMEs can extend benefits to hourly wage workers rather than outsourcing these positions, a situation which typically does not provide benefits.
- For the several APEC economies that have existing social insurance and healthcare programs, this structure supports the employer in providing flexible work environments and leave benefits. As such, the employer does not have to shoulder the burden. These economies should extend this level of support to SMEs.
- Researchers should disaggregate data based on business size. Many studies on issues of workplace violence and work-life balance do not differentiate between business size, making it difficult to determine which issues are most impactful for SMEs.
- Small business associations can partner with service providers to offer programs to companies in their associations. This can be helpful for those cases in which SMEs do not have the resources to develop their own services.
- The Papua New Guinea Business Coalition for Women partners with Femili PNG to provide family and sexual violence services to employees of coalition member companies.
- Certain unions provide maternity and healthcare benefits for their members, including the International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers, which operates in the U.S. and Canada.
- Governments can create an inventory of domestic associations and organizations for SMES that support health-related programs through training, certifications, or other mechanisms.
- Government or the private sector should conduct an inventory of existing regulations to identify where SMEs are exempt or included in HWHE related policies.

Key Takeaways

- Governments must be aware that firm size matters when developing programs for businesses!
- Though less visible, SMEs play an important role as employers of women in APEC economies. Adapting accessible policies and practices to promote and support the implementation of practices (health, workplaces free of sexual harassment, support for GBV victims, and work-life balance) for SMEs will facilitate improvements for women employees, critical for fostering sustained economic growth and productivity in the SME sector.
- Gendered data at the economy level is needed to better understand the prevailing conditions in the SME sector for women employees. Governments could collect this data through representative domestic surveys and coordinate with supporting organizations to compile case study and sector-specific information.

For more information on the APEC Healthy Women, Healthy Economies Initiative, see <http://healthywomen.apec.org/>.

Certain unions provide maternity and healthcare benefits for its union members, including the International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers, which operates in the U.S. and Canada.



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